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Writers of 52 Nations Meet at P.E.N. Congress

Worker columnist Joseph North describes here the P.E.N. conference in which he is taking part. The initials represent poets, playwrights, dramatists, and novelists, who compose the organization.

North is the author of "No Men Are Strangers," and his column by that name appears weekly in The Worker.

By JOSEPH NORTH

LOEB STUDENT CENTER, N. Y. U. — Six hundred writers from half the countries of the world are meeting, as this is written, at the international P.E.N. Congress to discuss the theme, "The Writer as Independent Spirit." They strive, as the world president of P.E.N., Arthur Miller put it, "to be a Republic of Letters." It might be said that they are not that, not yet, but they may be on the way.

Any gathering that draws such articulate spirits from 52 nations inevitably reflects the dominant ideologies of their homelands. This is certainly so among the poets and playwrights, the essayists and editors, the novelists, capitalist, socialist, and systems in transition. But a Republic who come from East and West, he requires the voice, the vote, of all its sections and not all are represented here — not yet.

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STILL MANY HERE feel that new breezes blow in an atmosphere that could be as airlessly antiseptic as an ivory tower. But even by the second day, one feels what is conceivably a fresh stirring.

You hear them debating the pros and cons of commitment in their search for independence. Keynoter, novelist Saul Bellow, assailed the elitist concept of letters; many others seem aware that the times scarcely allow a man to ignore the overwhelming reality, that he lives in a human hurricane today.

Miller put it this way in his opening remarks, commenting on world changes since P.E.N. was founded, "In almost 42 years revolution and counter-revolution and almost uninterrupted warfare have impregnated into every human activity the ques-

tion of the validity and prestige of competing social systems and nationalisms. Only from the viewpoint of another planet is it enough to know that a human being has managed to walk in space; on the earth the important question is whether he is Russian or American."

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HE SAID P.E.N. is a "unique organization" because, he felt, that "in great part," it has refused to allow itself to become "the agency of any political tendency." He pleaded with P.E.N. to "avoid political warfare" and therefore "make more possible a view of literature as literature, as an expression of the universal human condition and feelings, universal human needs." Man, he said, was unitarian, "there is a stubborn, underlying sameness of the human spirit whatever the variety of forms in which it is expressed."

There are others who may agree in general with this but feel there are certain complications based on class origins and interests; they have yet to be heard from. My comment here is put on paper the second day of the Congress, with a week more to go. The outlying districts are yet to be heard from.

I don't know how representative of their component P.E.N. bodies this assembly is, for it took a lot of money to come here from all ends of the earth, and most writers are not Rockefeller. Be that as it may, I feel, so far, the heady new, within the old that hangs on, of course.

New, in fact sensationally so, is the presence on our shores of Pablo Neruda, of Chile, "the giant of modern literature who has a great influence on young American poets." These were the words, not of this writer (who heartily agrees), but of the Washington representative, Roger L. Stevens, chairman of the National Council of Arts, who brought "President Johnson's greetings" here.

Miller and Archibald MacLeish used virtually the same terms to describe the world-famous Chilean writer who is a veteran member of the Communist Party and proudly so for several decades.

MacLeish, a prominent poet and

former Librarian of Congress, chaired the poetry reading that Neruda held at the 92nd Street YMHA where American poets pressed forward reverently to kiss the Chilean's hands.

MacLeish revealed that the State Department had refused P.E.N.'s petition for a visa for its invited guest, Neruda, and that the Chief Executive countermanded the rejection. So strong and intense are the pressures among many here to end old animosities.

Yet this writer feels, as Miller said, that P.E.N. has a lot more work cut out for it. Miller warned that the "agony of this time (must) not spuriously be covered over by an empty conviviality, but laid open to investigation." P.E.N. should become a "free arena," a "place of confrontation."

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THIS WRITER FEELS that the matter of the entry of Soviet writers into P.E.N. was made to hinge on the Sinyavsky-Daniel case. The issue was posed in razor-edge terms that could only make me — an American and a member of P.E.N. — feel the wisdom of the old adage, "Physician, heal thyself."

My point is that agreement or disagreement with the Soviets over the Sinyavsky case should not be grounds for keeping Russian writers out of P.E.N. Not if we are to be the Republic of Letters Miller spoke of. The areas of agreement can expand and differences could be considered within the walls of P.E.N. which should become that "free arena." This is not a bad thing to ponder in this moment when an escalating war is on, and when mankind possesses the absolute weapon.

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I SURVEYED the handsome surroundings of the Loeb Student Center and thought that a few historic facts should be considered, some that had a certain irony here: that we, the writers of the world could not be sitting on Washington Square discussing The Writer as Independent Spirit if 20 million Russians hadn't died to crush the conquering Nazi. That has, perhaps, a relevance, doesn't it?

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